

## 6. HELPING US APPLY THE HRO CONCEPTS TO OUR WORK

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### IMMUNITY TO CHANGE: A FACILITATED COMMITMENT EXERCISE PRESENTED BY ROBERT KEGAN AND LISA LAHEY



*Dr. Robert Kegan walks workshop participants through the Four Column Commitment Exercise. He is the William and Miriam Meehan Professor of Adult Learning and Professional Development at Harvard University.*

*“Think of this as a psychological Okefenokee Tour.”*

Dr. Robert Kegan’s opening remarks at the Managing the Unexpected Workshop’s fourth day.

*“We’re not Harvard professionals giving a presentation. We are going to be personal guides for you. We are going to give you the tools you can use to bring about what you’re hoping for.”*

Dr. Robert Kegan, introducing the Four Column Commitment Exercise that he and fellow Harvard University colleague Dr. Lisa Lahey guided workshop participants through.

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### **THIS WORKSHOP PROVIDES FIRST STEP -- BUT HOW DO WE ENSURE FOLLOW THROUGH?**

We work in a setting in which the potential for error and disaster is high and—sometimes—overwhelming. Risk assessment and decision-making are critical organizational and individual competencies. High Reliability Organizing principles can help us organize for high performance in the prescribed fire and wildland fire use arenas. This workshop is intended to be a step toward considering—and beginning to apply—these significant HRO principles to our wildland fire management work.

But how?

***“You think that your own issues or hidden commitments are matters that live off on the side, but they’re really roadblocks in everyday work. They really are direct, yet not so obvious, traps that keep you from what you’re trying to achieve.”***

*Member of wildland fire community at the national level, on Kegan and Lahey’s Four Column Commitment Exercise.*

***“If you’ve been unable to change, this is a great tool.”***

*Fire Use Specialist, on Kegan and Lahey’s Four Column Commitment Exercise.*

*“The difficulty lies not so much in developing new ideas as in escaping from the old ones.”*

John Maynard Keynes

Organizational psychologists and authors Robert Kegan and Lisa Lahey have devised a method. As they explain in their co-authored Harvard Business Review article *The Real Reason People Won’t*



*Dr. Lisa Lahey is the research director of the Change Leadership Group at the Harvard University Graduate School of Education.*

*Change: “. . . even as they [people] hold a sincere commitment to change, many people are unwittingly applying productive energy toward a hidden **competing commitment**. The resulting dynamic equilibrium stalls the effort in what looks like resistance, but is in fact a kind of personal immunity to change.*

*“Helping people overcome their limitations—including the messy, human contradictions that trouble us all—lies at the very heart of effective leadership.”*

Together, Kegan and Lahey have explored this perplexing phenomenon and have devised a unique method—a workable model—to overcome this immunity to change. Based on 15 years of working with hundreds of managers in a variety of companies, it’s a multi-stage process that:

- ❖ Guides you through a set of questions designed to uncover your “competing commitments.”
- ❖ Helps you examine these commitments to determine the underlying assumptions at their core.
- ❖ Shows you how to start the process of changing your behavior.

The actual process of making real progress toward overcoming your immunity to change, of course, takes weeks or months. But Kegan and Lahey helped the workshop participants embark on that initial giant step of walking through their exercise and introducing them to their proven four-step model.

“It’s about understanding the complexities of people’s behavior, guiding them through a productive process. . . and helping them cope with the inner conflict that is preventing them from achieving their goals,” Kegan and Lahey explain in the Harvard Business Review.

## 7. CONCLUSION



*The final afternoon's concluding question and answer session with special panel featuring (from left), Kathleen Sutcliffe, Karl Weick, Lisa Lahey, and Bob Keagan.*

### **DEFINITION OF 'LESSON LEARNED'**

An innovative approach or work practice that is captured and shared to promote repeat application. A lesson learned may also be an adverse work practice or experience that is captured or shared to avoid recurrence.

### **DEFINITION OF 'BEST PRACTICE'**

A process, technique, or innovative use of resources, technology, or equipment that has a proven track record of success in providing significant improvement to an organization.

### **BE MINDFUL OF ALLIGATORS**

*By Jim Saveland, Workshop Participant  
Assistant Director for Research, Rocky Mountain Research Station*

When Karl Weick and Kathleen Sutcliffe teach High Reliability Organizing, they make use of disasters—such as the Tenerife air crash—and excellence—such as operations on an aircraft carrier's flight deck.

There are always important lessons to be learned from when things go “wrong” *and* when things go “right.” Both are important. It's all about combining a preoccupation with failure from High Reliability Organizing and benchmarking from learning organizations.



*The Cerro Grande Staff Ride provided a “rich learning environment” on the first Managing the Unexpected Workshop.*

In the first Managing the Unexpected Workshop, we looked at a disaster when the Cerro Grande prescribed fire escaped and burned into Los Alamos, NM. We found ourselves in a rich learning environment.

With this second Managing the Unexpected Workshop, we moved to the fire environment of the southeastern United States in general, and to the Okefenokee Ecosystem Fuels Management Program in particular.

Prescribed burning in the southeast is analogous to flight deck operations on an aircraft carrier. There’s a whole lot of burning going on here, and the potential for disaster may be just around the corner. Smoke on highways has resulted in multiple car accidents and fatalities.

Horizontal roll vortices in this region’s flat terrain have trapped and killed firefighters.

Out of the ashes of the 1990 Shorts Fire, a phoenix began to take wing. Here you will now find GOAL (Greater Okefenokee Association of Landowners)—a stellar example of collaboration between multiple Federal agencies, State agencies, and private landowners in a complex fire environment (80 members, two million acres of land).

Once again, we visited the five hallmarks of High Reliability Organizing:

- Preoccupation with failure,
- Reluctance to simplify interpretations,
- Sensitivity to operations,
- Commitment to resilience, and
- Deference to expertise.



*Dr. Karl Weick responds to a workshop participant's question about High Reliability Organizing.*

people accountable” through archaic performance management systems is no match (and of little use) to the powerful psychological forces at work here.

Kegan and Lahey’s four column exercise to uncover our hidden competing commitments is a significant first big step to bringing about meaningful change—change that lasts.

At this managing the unexpected workshop, we journeyed out into the Okefenokee Swamp to explore the terrain of High Reliability Organizing. And now—because of this voyage into the unexpected—as we return to our own day-to-day operations, we are all a little more mindful of the alligators that await us within in our own work environments.

We soon discovered that the swamp is a rich learning environment, too.

In addition to Karl Weick and Kathleen Sutcliffe, Scott Snook, Robert Kegan, and Lisa Lahey also provided us with discerning and insightful presentations.

Scott Snook gave us a look into today’s military operations. For those people who think the military is all about “command and control,” Dr. Snook’s primary message must have been quite a shock. From his perspective, today’s high-performing military operations are all about being “*in* command, and *out* of control.”

This is the essence behind a principles-centered approach to management that is embodied in “doctrine.”

Harvard professors Robert Kegan and Lisa Lahey drew the tough assignment of helping us be able to walk the talk. Too often—as we all know—our good intentions to change for the better, unfortunately, do not come to pass.

When this happens, we run smack dab into our own “immunity to change.” “Holding

